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ABSTRACT

Three major concerns affect higher education in the United States: the decline in student population with some curtailment of programs, high inflation rates with constantly rising tuition, and political pressures on public colleges and universities. These factors affect study abroad programs in several ways. Public institutions may experience less decrease in enrollment; they should therefore increase their overseas offerings and show that such programs do not cost more than home campus programs. Private institutions need not curtail programs; they can change them to attract more students. Also, some consolidation of programs can take place to avoid unnecessary duplication. In addition to these considerations, colleges and universities might capitalize on the growing awareness of the need for U.S. citizens to be prepared for growing international interdependence. They could design study abroad programs to meet evolving student needs and interests, make provisions for students in programs other than foreign languages, and then seek ways to administer language proficiency examinations which will bring with them some foreign language certification. In addition to these internal factors, some external factors affect study abroad programs such as the rise and fall of the dollar, inflation, and unstable political conditions in some countries. (AMH)

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Must Hard Times In Higher Education Affect Study Abroad Programs?

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The earliest foreign study programs organized by American colleges date back to the 30's. Participation in them was designed for an intellectual and economic elite, just as was higher education itself. After the Second World War, the phenomenal growth of higher education in the United States was accompanied by a parallel expansion of foreign study opportunities, first of the traditional summer and junior year programs and then by the extension of offerings at all leve's to graduate and undergraduate students alike who had sufficient foreign language background. The period of expansion can be considered to have come to an end in the late 70's. In higher education in the 80's we are more concerned with holding our own than with growth and innovation. I intend to support the thesis in this paper that study abroad programs are capable of adjusting so as to serve new groups of students and engage in new educational missions. Hard times in higher education need not threaten foreign study programs.

First let me mention some of the negative factors which affect higher education in the United States. There are three major concerns: demography, economics, and politics.

Population studies tell us that the number of 18 year olds will continue to decline for another ten years approximately, until the mid-1990's, at which time a modest rise will begin. Even if we assume

that not many institutions will have to close in the next decade, we must be prepared for a certain curtailment of academic programs and a lowering of student quality as numerous institutions find themselves obligated to become less selective in order to maintain adequate enrollments. In addition to this program retrenchment and to the loss of some student and perhaps even institutional quality, we are faced with increased pressure to make college education "practical." Thus even traditional liberal arts institutions find themselves confronted with creeping vocationalism.

Higher education, unable to modify them, can only react to economic cycles by raising tuition and cutting costs in inflationary periods and consolidating and expanding programs in more stable times. The use of increased enrollments as a budget-balancing device is no longer possible for most institutions. In public colleges and universities budgets are dependent on state or municipal budgets as well as student fees. Private institutions rely, of course, primarily on tuition and endowment income. All of these can be adversely affected by a national economy that is in trouble. The problems of higher education can also be compounded by political decisions to ask the student or the student's family to carry a larger portion of the cost of higher education or to reduce national, state or local support for certain institutions or programs on the basis of ill-conceived applications of a particular political philosophy.

Recent high inflation rates have led to rapid increases in tuition fees at both private and public institutions. This trend may change

soon. Nevertheless, if tuition at private colleges continues to rise while federal and state assistance to students and institutions declines, the private liberal arts colleges will inevitably lose many of their prospective students to public institutions. While it is quite possible that the percentage of 18 year olds electing to continue their education will rise--and this will solve part of the problem--if present trends do not change significantly, public institutions are likely to attract an increasing proportion of the college age population.

How do these factors affect study abroad programs? First, public institutions, since they will possibly maintain their enrollments or experience a smaller loss than the private ones, should consider ways not of retrenching but of improving or even expanding their overseas offerings. They can expect to attract some students who in the past might have attended the programs of selective private institutions. Except for budgetary constraints affecting entire colleges and universities, a real possibility, of course, it is unlikely that programs sponsored by public institutions will need to be concerned about recruitment if they are doing well now. Therefore public institutions ought to evaluate their programs carefully and seek ways of bettering their academic quality. They have initiated foreign study programs more recently than the private institutions and have often been more innovative. When threatened by the budget cutters, they should be prepared to show that study abroad does not cost more than study on the home campus and may even cost less.

It is the private colleges, however, which sponsor the greatest number of foreign study programs. They may have to contend with declining enrollments approximately in proportion to shrinking institutional enrollments, but the effect on foreign study need not be severe. Programs may decide to accept more students from other campuses than at present and they may become less selective when seeking applicants. Above all, they can change in ways that serve the campus population better and thus make enrollment in a foreign study program more attractive. Many institutions, in fact, find their overseas programs growing at present while at the same time overall institutional enrollment is threatened.

Another area that needs exploration is the question of numbers. There may be too many programs in the same place trying to do the same thing. Even among consortia of institutions that work closely together in the United States, the members sometimes maintain their own separate programs abroad. Therefore, a greater consolidation of programs seems called for, a process that can be initiated both in the United States by neighboring or similar institutions and abroad in areas where several programs are in the same location and engaged in essentially similar activities. We tend to be quite jealous of the unique aspects of our programs and certainly institutional goals should not be compromised. Nevertheless, the profession would do well to make a greater effort to cooperate. Among the possibilities are the sharing of classes or facilities, the joint organization of activities, etc. Ultimately, the most desirable type of cooperation may be the merger of two or more programs.

Recent efforts in professional, business and government circles designed to promote a national awareness of the need to prepare United States citizens for life in a world of growing international interdependence and complexity are beginning to bear fruit. The commitment to international education exists on many college campuses and is increasingly a curricular concern at the high school and elementary school levels. Similarly there seems to be a new awareness (although still modest) of the need for foreign language study in other than the usual humanistic circles. Special programs such as intensive language classes, business courses, language study for certain fields such as social work or international banking are all very attractive to students. Therefore, enrollments may rise slightly in the next few years as a percentage of total college enrollments. However, we are not likely to achieve the levels of the 60's, primarily because there will simply be fewer college students.

Many study abroad programs are still designed essentially for the undergraduate language major and have made only a few concessions to evolving student interests. Indeed, students often think that they must be language majors in order to participate in a program abroad. Since this is not at all the case in most programs, a number of suggestions may be useful here:

- Course offerings should center more on the social sciences and business, without, however, abandoning the traditional areas such as art, history, language and literature.

- Institutions which have a separate foreign study office that operates the college's programs, may wish to seek greater liaison with the various academic departments, especially those which have not normaliy been involved with foreign study.

- More semester or quarter long programs may have to be made available than at present. Although many institutions still prefer the full year program, a creative approach to the academic calendar may be of some benefit.

- Greater attention should be paid to providing students with internship opportunities while they are abroad. Indeed, it may even be desirable to make an internship the basis of certain programs, particularly in business or sociology.

- Programs need to evolve in ways that reflect campus curricular changes. More work needs to be done in Third World countries, in Asia and Africa, and new approaches are required that would enable programs to focus on such questions as development or the environment.

- Programs must seek ways to provide work of appropriate academic quality for students who study abroad with less preparation in the foreign language than in the past. Most institutions are aware of this decline in language proficiency, but few have made changes in the structure or content of their programs to deal with the problem. It is not enough to reduce the number of readings or papers in a course or settle for poorer student performance.

Thus, because of changes in student preparation and goals, we will need to move more rapidly than at present to accommodate the needs and interests of college students who wish to study abroad.

The current move towards vocationalism is not all bad. Many students have finally come to believe that knowledge of a foreign language has practical applications and that experience in a foreign culture can prepare them for a high level career in international business, banking or education, or in government. At my own institution, participation in an off campus program is voluntary except for language majors. Nevertheless, we find considerable interest in study abroad among our students and increasing enrollments in our programs. As a result more than half our students currently spend at least one semester abroad during their college careers.

One powerful way to convince students of the validity of a foreign study experience is the possibility of certification, that is, providing them with some evidence of their language ability that will be immediately recognized and accepted by employers. While no such certificate is offered at present by an American group, a movement is now developing that would permit the testing and certification of foreign language proficiency. Students respond with great enthusiasm to the idea of a test that would allow them to demonstrate their real skills in a foreign language and they know that a period of study abroad enables them to acquire a level of proficiency that is virtually impossible to attain in the United States. Institutions which sponsor foreign study programs would thus do well to seek ways to administer proficiency examinations to their students.

It is now more than 25 years since the Department of State, through the Foreign Service Institute, began to develop an oral language proficiency interview. This type of exercise yields ratings of 1 to 5

which can be modified by a plus. It is used primarily by government agencies such as Action/Peace Corps, the Department of State, the C.I.A., the National Security Agency, the Defense Language Institute, and also by state departments of education and a number of colleges and other groups. Recently, the Educational Testing Service has been working closely with the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), the Defense Language Institute and the language school of the C.I.A. to develop a rating scale that is appropriate to college level students and non-government specialists. Several workshops have been held and it is now clear, at least to this writer, that oral proficiency testing will soon become our most important tool for evaluating and certifying language ability. The oral interview is unrelated to course content; it tests functional language ability. It is the single, most appropriate instrument available to enable students to demonstrate their level of oral foreign language skill.

The Educational Testing Service and ACTFL have also developed proficiency criteria for the other language skills. Thus it is likely that in a short time tests will be available to test not only speaking, but also comprehension, readings, writing, and an understanding of the culture. If the tests were administered at the end of a period of study abroad or before graduation from college, students would have tangible proof, acceptable to the federal government and many states and increaingly to employers in business of their foreign language proficiency. We have never done anything like this before in the history of langauge study in the United States and I cannot overemphasize the importance of this enterprise. It is difficult to imagine a student who would not want

to take these tests in order to offer proof of what he or she has learned abroad and thus supply credible evidence of skills that are not ordinarily presented by candidates in a highly competitive job market.

Successful foreign study programs have been designed for students with little or no background in the language of the country. If current efforts continue--and we must all contribute to them--then international issues will be of increasingly greater concern to our students, at least insofar as knowledge of a foreign language, an understanding of international economics and international business, and the study of international relations can help them prepare for a career. Institutional goals focusing on the liberal arts and student goals centering on career preparation can thus merge not only in the traditional foreign study program but also in programs designed for students with no significant language background. Few serious programs of this type are now available. Imagine, however, how beneficial they can be to students, particularly if the experience culminates in the attainment of language proficiency certification as has just been described.

Most of the factors affecting foreign study that have been analyzed thus far have to do with the precarious position of higher education in the United States. There is, however, another set of issues that affect study abroad programs and which are essentially external to higher education. The rise and fall in the fortunes of the dollar is one of these factors. At present our programs are doing well economically, but we are concerned because the dollar is not likely to maintain its

strength. Will the dollar continue to buy as much foreign currency as it now does? Today's surplus can become tomorrow morning's deficit. Institutions which have been involved with study abroad programs over a period of time have probably leanred by now that the exchange question is cyclical, that there are good years and bad ones and that considerable belt tightening may be in order when the dollar declines. Some programs may, in fact, once again encounter severe problems because of fluctuating exchange rates.

Inflation is another factor with which program budgets must deal. If the dollar declines significantly in the next months or years and inflation in other countries continues to outrun our own, then programs may find difficulty in constructing appropriate budgets. Because of this it is important to develop internal strategies that enable programs to deal with unexpected budgeting problems on the one hand and local or state administrators on the other in order to convince them that a year or two of patience may be required before a program can regain its stability. Who would have thought that the dollar could achieve its current spectacular position after its terrible decline of only five years ago? How long will this situation last?

These two fiscal worries, foreign inflation and the fortunes of the dollar, are examples of the short-term problems that can affect programs. Unstable political conditions in some countries are another. In the long run, however, the future of foreign study programs is far less likely to be threatened by international economics or international politics than by the difficulties faced at home by American higher education.

The next few years will probably witness a small reduction in the number of programs, increased cooperation among the survivors, and a considerable modification in the nature of the programs themselves and the students who participate in them. An apparent move away from narcisstic self absorption on the part of the nation, the increasingly accepted view that the national interest requires the ability to deal effectively with other countries, and cultures, and the trend towards practicality in education all make it possible to predict a reasonably bright future for foreign study.